

THOUGHTS
ON THE
BACKSLIDINGS OF BELIEVERS,
AND ON THE
MEANS OF RECOVERY.

Wilt Thou not revive us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?
PSALM lxxxv. 6.—*He restoreth my soul.* PSALM xxiii. 3.

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IT has often occurred to some individuals, that if a proper mode could be adopted of publishing valuable religious Manuscripts, or of reprinting scarce and useful Books, it might be productive of some benefit to the community.

WITH this view, a Society was lately established, which is governed by certain regulations suitable to the nature of the institution. The expence of their tracts are at present defrayed by the subscriptions of the members.—But as the extent of their usefulness must depend upon the amount of their funds, they solicit the assistance of such as do not find it convenient to become members.—Contributions may be sent to Mr. JOHN OGLE Bookseller, Parliament-Square, Treasurer to the Society; or to Mr. JOHN CAMPBELL, Merchant, Grass-market.

Edinburgh, August 12, 1793.

THOUGHTS

ON THE

BACKSLIDINGS OF BELIEVERS, &c.

ALTHOUGH the word of GOD uniformly establishes the comfortable and animating doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, yet it is clear, both from scripture and experience, that the people of GOD may, for a season, fall under grievous backslidings. This arises from a variety of causes, both internal and external. But as the spiritual prosperity of believers is a matter which nearly concerns, not their own comfort merely, but the glory of GOD, and the good of their fellow-men, the following plain remarks on that subject will, it is hoped, be seasonable at this day of general declension.

It must however be observed, that it is not the declensions of nominal Christians, but of the true children of GOD, which are now to be considered. With respect to the former, sooner or later they will fall away. Temporal prosperity, persecution, or reproach, will soon discover their hypocrisy. Having no spiritual discernment of the truth, being destitute of those gracious principles of which the word of GOD is the proper nourishment, and being actuated by selfish motives only, they will by and by lose relish for the means of grace, probably relinquish their profession of religion entirely, or may even prove implacable enemies to the cause and friends of Him whom they once called their Master.

As to the real Christian, often there seems to be an universal change in his case and frame. Every thing is out of order; and he languishes under spiritual indisposition. It is now that iniquities prevail against him, and daily gain ground. He sighs, and goes backward. *Gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not* *. After a long course of lively experience, when his soul was *like a watered garden* †, all with him now is dry, languid, and barren. His heart indeed still remembers God; but not with those warm emotions of love, gratitude, and confidence in Him, which he was wont to feel. The ordinances of religion, those precious pastures of grace, where his soul was fed and strengthened, and where he held lively communion with his heavenly Father, are not now to him what they once were. Happy as he used to be in the company of the saints, now he has, in a great measure, lost relish for their fellowship. How eagerly did he embrace every opportunity for secret devotion! But now he feels insensibility and indifference daily gaining ground in his soul. His heart does not now (as it was wont to do) enter into the case of the church, and rejoice or lament as the cause of Jesus flourishes or decays. The dispensations of Providence are overlooked and neglected; nor does his exercise suit the aspect of God's operations. In short, he keeps up the form of religion, as formerly; does not habitually omit either public or private devotion: but the heart, the spirit, and life of vital godliness he by no means feels as in times past.

This melancholy condition of the Christian, though most criminal and unpleasant, is not desperate. He may indeed be suffered to continue long in this uncomfortable and awful state. But

* Hosea vii. 9.

† Isaiah lviii. 11.

the LORD will raise him up again. JESUS prays for him, *that his faith fail not* *. His union to the Prince of life secures his restoration to the enjoyment of all the privileges and comforts connected with vital godliness.—It is impossible, however, sufficiently to dread, with holy awe, even the appearance of falling into this deplorable frame of mind.

Spiritual declensions generally originate in the neglect, or careless performance of secret duties. Lively secret devotion is a mean eminently blessed for promoting grace in the heart. When the Christian therefore omits these duties, or performs them negligently, he must necessarily grow weak and languid. When David *cried unto the LORD*, he was *strengthened with strength in his soul* †. So is every believer.—If the child of GOD is enabled to exercise faith in prayer, though he may labour under many discouragements and difficulties, he shall experience the accomplishment of the promise, That in waiting on the LORD, he renews his strength.

When the Christian gives too great a proportion of his time to *public*, and is cold and formal in *secret* duties, he usually suffers severely for it. To others he may appear lively and spiritual; but the solid, rich, and powerful effects of the truth, which he felt in his own heart when he was more assiduous in holding secret fellowship with GOD, are in a great measure gone. None can prize *public* ordinances more highly than the flourishing Christian. Yet he feels, that it is chiefly by means of *secret* duties (where his work is more immediately between GOD and his own soul, and where he is disentangled from those snares which too often stimulate him when in company), that his soul grows

* Luke xxii. 32.

† Psalm cxxxviii. 3.

in judicious and solid Christian experience. "The
 " richest variety of public means (says a much-
 " esteemed author), and the closest attendance upon
 " them, will leave us lean and pining in the midst
 " of plenty, if we are remiss and formal" in secret
 prayer, and in reading the word *.

It is by no means intended in the least to depreciate the public institutions of religion. Social worship is of the highest importance to the Christian.—How frequently is his soul quickened, refreshed, and comforted, in the sanctuary of GOD! There he is often *satisfied as with marrow and fatness* †.—Unless these *public* means, however, are carefully and diligently improved by him in *secret*, their end, as to him, will, in a great measure, be frustrated.

Undue attachment to the world must also be considered as a cause of spiritual declensions. How unseemly for a redeemed soul, and how far beneath the dignity of a co-heir with CHRIST the LORD, to be inordinately pursuing the fading honours, or the unsatisfactory advantages of this world! Nothing can be more destructive to liveliness in religion than this disposition. Because of *their covetousness*, the LORD is *wroth with his children, and smites them* ‡. By indulging it, the Christian *pierces himself through with many sorrows* §. While in this world, it is necessary that he sojourn *as a stranger and pilgrim* §. If he overlooks his character as such, and wanders from GOD after vanity, it is likely the LORD may restore him by means the most painful and distressing.

If the Christian indulges any one sin, however secret, it will prove as a cancer, or gangrene, and

* See Newton's Works, vol. iii. page 213. † Psalm lxxiii. 5.
 ‡ Isaiah lvii. 17. § 1 Tim. vi. 10. § Heb. xi. 13.

eat away the life and power of religion. It may be he observes it; but his resistance to it rather arises from a *conviction* of guilt, than from *heart-detestation* of it, as a loathsome and abominable object. Hence he does not appropriate the grace and Spirit of JESUS for its speedy and effectual mortification, but trifles with, and makes light of it.—It is almost certain, that this unhappy frame will issue in that anguish of mind, and that breaking of the bones, of which David mourns so bitterly*. *It is dangerous to resist light.* The Lord severely chastises his children when they do so. And who can tell how long he may contend in hot displeasure with them on this account?

Immoderate affection for things in themselves lawful, may be ranked among the causes of declension. In proportion as the Christian admits idols into his heart, he loses sight of GOD as the great portion and rest of his soul. *Whatever* he does not *enjoy in GOD*, will sooner or later prove a trial and cross to him. Such indulgence must provoke his Father to hide his face, and to write bitter things against him.

When the believer engages in spiritual duties from no higher principle than that he may exercise gifts, or do honour to himself, he is certain of feeling dismal consequences. If singleness of heart, in any part of our Christian walk, is wanting, it necessarily occasions weakness and feebleness in serious godliness.—Self-seeking is a dangerous distemper. It wounds and destroys in proportion as it prevails or is indulged. Uprightness and simplicity are essential parts of Christianity. Nor can we follow JESUS if we do not deny ourselves.

* Psal. li.

Every experienced Christian can tell how much he has languished, after indulging sloth and security. Diligence and activity are no less necessary in spiritual than in natural life. An indolent frame is the bane of lively religion. It paves the way to multiplied evils; and gives our spiritual enemies every possible advantage over us.

But the great cause of spiritual declensions, and that indeed which occasions every other, is, omitting the exercise of faith in CHRIST. He is our Head of Influences; and, by faith, his mystical members derive renewed supplies of grace from his fulness.—It is impossible, therefore, that we can flourish in the divine life, if faith is low in its exercise. It is then that unbelief, that root of bitterness, prevails, and is succeeded by every other corruption.—Not feeling the refreshing inward power of religion, duty becomes burdensome: and matters are never better with us till the LORD increase faith, and we are again led forth in its lively exercise.

*To those who are labouring under Spiritual Declensions,
the following Directions are humbly offered.*

HEAR your heavenly Father, in astonishing love, saying to you, *Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD, for I am married unto you**. *O Israel, return unto the LORD thy GOD, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity*†. *Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings*‡. *Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness*||? *O what melting words are these!*

* Jer. iii. 14.

† Hosea xiv. 1.

‡ Jer. iii. 22.

|| Jer. ii. 31.

The present case of your soul is attended with circumstances the most sinful and uncomfortable. O lay it deeply to heart! Why should you, who have *known* the constraining love of CHRIST, resemble the *hypocrite*? It is not now with you as in times past, when your soul *followed hard after GOD**, and when your walk with him was close and tender.—Set apart some time for particular exercise about your unhappy situation. Examine what have been the causes of your backsliding. Renew your appropriation of CHRIST, as your All. Make application of his blood to your conscience. Try to be deeply affected with your ingratitude in wickedly departing from your GOD. Trust that He will be to you as the dew, restore your soul, lead you into green pastures, and keep you from falling. *Dwell under His shadow*:—then shalt thou *revive as the corn, grow as the vine, and cast forth thy roots as Lebanon*†. In this way, *strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die*‡.

Consider how necessary it is, for promoting the glory of GOD, your own comfort, and the good of your fellow Christians, that you abound in the work of the LORD. A Christian eminently lively, humble, and exemplary, whatever his station be, is a public blessing: but if carnal, earthly, and cold in religion, he does more harm than he imagines.—“How
 “charming (says the late Mr. Brown) to see a saint
 “abound in the fruits of righteousness! to see him
 “at once devout, always leaning on his Saviour,
 “always walking with his GOD: a dutiful child,
 “an affectionate husband, a truly kind parent, a
 “faithful subject, a peaceful neighbour, a generous
 “friend, a redeemer of time, a counsellor in per-
 “plexity, a sympathizer in trouble, a comforter
 “amidst grief; firm, intrepid, judicious; full of

* Psalm lxiii. 3.

† Hosea xiv. 5. 7.

‡ Rev. iii. 2.

“tenderness, compassion, and benevolence; devout, without seeking to be seen of men; modest, without bashfulness; frank and affable, without impertinence; obliging and complaisant, without servility; cheerful, without noise *.”

The following Hints are suggested as Means of PREVENTING Spiritual Declensions.

ENDEAVOUR to acquire a judicious and comprehensive knowledge of the scriptures.—The food and nourishment of the new nature is derived from this fountain. We are born again, and grow up to the measure of perfect men in **CHRIST**, by means of the word. From the oracles of **GOD**, the Christian is furnished with every thing necessary for him while in this wilderness.—Be concerned, therefore, to *feel* more and more the influence of the truth. Never rest satisfied with the clearest speculative views of it, while your heart is not warmed, refreshed, or sanctified thereby. *These* are certain concomitants of the teaching of the **HOLY GHOST**. Employ him therefore to *guide you into all truth* †.

Often make appropriation of **CHRIST**. *As you have received CHRIST JESUS the Lord, so walk ye in Him* ‡. Live by faith, and cast all your burdens upon him. Never forget his own declaration, *As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me.—Without me ye can do nothing* §.

Study to plead the faithful promises of your own **GOD**; and believe that they shall certainly be ful-

* Christian Journal, page 196. † John xvi. 13. ‡ Col. ii. 6.
§ John xv. 4, 5.

filled to you. As your liveliness in religion depends upon the renewed communications and powerful influences of the HOLY SPIRIT, apply especially those promises which relate to him; particularly, Prov. i. 23. Isaiah xlv. 3, 4. John vii. 37, 38, 39. Rom. viii. 26, 27. Sensible that, by your own exertions, you can do nothing acceptable in the sight of GOD, often pray as the church does, *Awake, O north wind, and come thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out* *.

Watch carefully over your own heart. Observe the first motions of sin; and, in the diligent use of proper means, employ JESUS to destroy them.

Attend the searching and powerful preaching of the word: associate with such Christians as are most humble, spiritual, and judicious; and carefully avoid entering upon unnecessary disputes, or indulging a censorious or haughty temper. Learn of CHRIST, who was meek and lowly in heart.

Beware of a talkative habit. Let composure and gravity mark your whole deportment. Levity and lightness of spirit will do you great harm.—Let not your gravity, however, degenerate into austere, reserved, or uncourteous behaviour. An equal and serene temper is a blessing for which we cannot be too solicitous.

Endeavour to enter into the spirit of every duty you are called to. Let every hour of your time be employed usefully. Study to serve CHRIST, your Master, in your lawful business, as well as in religious duties. If possible, retire often from the world, and spend some time in extraordinary devotion. This you will find an excellent mean of promoting the life of religion.

Walk habitually as in the presence of GOD. Live near CHRIST: love Him supremely: rest con-

* Cant. iv. 16.

confidently in Him : devote your all to Him, who loved you, and gave Himself for you ; and, as a redeemed soul, who works *from*, and not *for* life, do all in obedience to Him, and for His glory.—Thus *building up yourself on your most holy faith, praying in the HOLY GHOST, keep yourself in the love of GOD, looking for the mercy of our LORD JESUS CHRIST unto eternal life* *.

* Jude, ver. 20, 21.

THE END.